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## THE FRENCH NAVY.—II.

BY M. GEORGES CLEMENCEAU.

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IN 1881, the accession to power of Gambetta's administration, upon which so many hopes were based, gave some strength to the new school by the selection for the Navy portfolio of Commandant Gougeard, who, in spite of his heroic behavior during the war of 1870, had been retired with the grade of "Captain." His appointment was, indeed, a kind of revolution.

Gougeard found himself suddenly at the head of the Admirals who, in fear of his independent temper and of his desire for reform, had broken his career. All who knew the energy—we may say almost rudeness—of the new Secretary of the Navy, did not doubt that, from the very day of his commission he would apply himself to laying a basis for the future organization. In this assurance they were not deceived. He undertook all the reforms, reforms of the staffs and the material; the creation of a high school for naval war; plans for the construction of fast modern ships, and for placing the harbors and coasts in a condition of defence. And then his successor, Admiral Jauréguiberry, by a few strokes of the pen, reduced all his patriotic labor to nothing.

Then came the Chinese campaign of 1883–1885. Our navy distinguished itself by a few acts of heroism; but it must be admitted that it did not meet a fleet worthy of the name. Beyond the torpedoing of the two Chinese frigates anchored at Schei-Poo, the squadron of Admiral Courbet only resorted to two methods of operation; bombardment and landing.

Once only did Courbet meet a division of five Chinese ships, which he endeavored to run down. He could not overtake them, however, owing to their superior speed. Here is a telling incident: During the chase of the Chinese squadron, the ironclad "Le Bayard" displayed a speed superior to that of the cruisers, and kept

ahead of the racing platoon ; yet the " Bayard " had never developed a speed higher than thirteen knots.

Thus the Chinese campaign fully revealed our inferiority in speed, and also our lack of serviceable cruisers. The official reports of Admiral Courbet are full of complaints in regard to this particular, a fact which was not altogether a surprise to his comrades who had remained in France. For, while he was fighting on the Chinese coast, one of our most distinguished general officers, the Admiral Dupetit-Thouars, wrote him the following letter, which discloses a great deal in regard to the true state of our naval forces :

"TOULON, March 12, 1884.

"MY DEAR COURBET :

"What shall I tell you about our navy ? I do not see a particle of energy anywhere. It seems to me they do not know their own position in regard to ship-building. Great speed is absolutely paramount, yet we continue to build ships which are neither fish nor flesh, so to speak.

"However, they are now drawing plans here for two torpedo cruisers of 1,200 tons, and two torpedoes of thirty-three meters to be added to the fleet, which will permit us to make interesting studies. We have worked a good deal here in Toulon on the practical use of the 'Whitehead' torpedoes, and the results have been satisfactory. Unfortunately, however, this is not general, and at the other ports they do not even succeed in regulating them.

"On the whole, we find only dullness and repetition all over the line. No heart, no authority. Most of our comrades do not dare to take command, and the auxiliary department bury us under the moss. Nothing manly.

"Farewell, my good friend, . . .

"(Signed)

B. DUPETIT-THOUARS,  
Vice-Admiral."

This letter had been written eighteen months, when Admiral Aube became Secretary of the Navy. At this time Admiral Réveillere made a sketch of the situation identical to that penned by Admiral Dupetit-Thouars.

"At the time when Admiral Aube gave a new impulse to the Navy, it was practically held together by a mere *coat of paint*. It was like a vessel cleaned up and splendid to look at, on the decks of which, however, there took place antiquated drillings under the careful supervision of a glittering staff. And when Admiral Aube exclaimed : 'All this is but a deceptive painting, your ship is sinking, she is like a pre-historic vessel, the timbers of which are worm-eaten, and which will sink at the first shock,' one may realize what shouts of rage met this utterance of a mar-sport.

"We were very proud of our Navy, and this pride seemed justified. The Navy looked so well. Its renown was unstained. It was still the same old

Navy, and that was indeed its misfortune, for everything around it had undergone changes.”\*

Trained at an epoch when sail only was used, Admiral Aube was passionate for progress. Like Gougeard, he was one of the heroes of the war of 1870. He had command of a brigade of the army of the Loire, and gallantly did his duty, chiefly at the battle of Beaune-la-Rolande. He had not gained any promotion by it. *Capitaine de vaisseau* at the time the war broke out, he did not become Rear-Admiral until ten years after. High-minded, he considered it his duty to express his ideas of reform before all. He had published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* a series of articles much appreciated. Under his direction a young journalist of talent, Mons. Gabriel Charmes, carried on, through the press, a vigorous campaign in favor of the new ideas—for we must still, in 1896, designate as “new ideas” the proposals of reform, at least dating back to 1849 !

The strong articles in the *Journal des Debats*, in which paper Mons. Gabriel Charmes is nowadays replaced by Mons. Weil, who used to be his opponent and the reputed spokesman of the syndicate of the Metallurgy ; the various papers of Mons. Charmes together with his essays on the subject in the *Revue Bleue*, and the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, resulted in the publication of a vivid book *La Réforme de la Marine*, in which the young writer brought before the public the reforms which Admiral Aube proposed to attempt a few months later.

This campaign, which threatened the interests closest to the heart of a clique, which was at once military, political, and industrial, brought an opposition the more earnest from the fact that the author belonged to a set where the high influences of the middle-class oligarchy were most powerful. The feudal admiralty and its faithful ally, the Metallurgy Syndicate, were simultaneously menaced, so that as soon as the consequences of the proposed reform appeared plainly, some of the newspapers which supported the “new navy” passed cynically from one camp into the other. I have already told how Mons. Emile Weil, supported by the *Creusot*, in his controversy with Mons. Gabriel Charmes, had at the end taken the place of the latter on the staff of the paper which is the accredited mouthpiece of the French high *bourgeoisie*.

\*“ *Guerre navale de Demain.*” (Preface of the Admiral Réveillère.)

However, the ideas were launched. A group of publicists seemed to be set upon a strong campaign in the press in favor of the *Marine Nouvelle*; and Mons. de Freycinet, charged with the task of forming a Cabinet in January, 1886, deemed it advisable to call to his side Admiral Aube, to whom, in so doing, he had even to forgive some ill-disposed writings in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* on the faults and mistakes of the (1870-1871) war in the provinces.

The accession of Admiral Aube to power is unquestionably the greatest event in the patriotic struggle against the routine and system of "*favoritisme*" which has kept the French navy in shackles for a century. From the very first hour, the new Secretary of the Navy showed by his acts his desire to cut loose from the past, to follow out to the end his plans of reform, and to perfect reform in spite of all interested opposition.

What were his plans? To enumerate them it is sufficient to quote the following extracts from a paper published by Admiral Aube in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* under the title of "*La Guerre Maritime et les Ports Militaires de la France*:"

"The ironclad navy has outlived its time, and together with *the great war*, of which it was the weapon, it must disappear to make room for a new navy, the implement of the wars of the future; wars of cruise—that is, mercantile wars.

"The instruments of these wars are, for the greater part, gunboats and torpedoes for defense, with cruisers, all having a maximum speed, and all vessels of that class reduced to minimum dimensions, so as to insure autonomy and effective power.

"The number, the speed, and the invisibility, constitute the important factors of the superiority of these engines of war. The tactical and technical science of the future wars is to be created. Like any other science, it will be the outcome of a patient and scientific observation of the facts. The staffs which will set in motion the engines of that war are also to be created and organized. Their value in actual operations will be exactly measured by the degree of experience acquired during peace.

"The axiom remains true: in the navy nothing can be improvised.

"For all these reasons the reorganization of our navy, both of the services and the material, is paramount, as an urgent and patriotic necessity."

Those were only general considerations. It was the province of the reformer in the Cabinet to pass from the theory to practice. Admiral Aube's administration was, in every point, an active one. As soon as he became Secretary of the Navy it did not require a long survey for him to gather all the proofs that he had judged but too correctly, that, in case of war, the French

navy was not in a position to fulfill efficaciously the task which would confront it. Unable to shuffle off his duty, he denounced squarely the evils and took the necessary steps to avert them.

Upon his order, Mons. Peschart d'Ambly, who had been for a long time "*Directeur du Matériel*" of the Navy Department, made an exact list of those of our battleships actually in trim to fight. This list was the irrefutable proof the lamentable incapacity of the great chiefs. It proved, beyond possible argument, that the hundreds of millions of francs expended for the defence of the country had melted in the crucible of the "Rue Royale"—that is, had been squandered in unproductive outlays.

This frightful revelation decided the Cabinet, under the threat of the resignation, three times tendered, of Admiral Aube, to admit the principle of an extraordinary expenditure for the fleet, amounting to two hundred millions, besides the ordinary credits. Of this amount one hundred and forty millions were appropriated to the building of cruisers and gunboats of low water draught, and torpedoes, all to be of maximum speed. The remaining sixty millions were reserved for the establishment of second-class navy yards at Porto Vecchio (Corsica) and Bizerte (Tunis), and also for torpedo stations on the coasts.

It was possible to begin the realization of these plans, as soon as the Committee of Ways and Means had granted a first yearly instalment of thirty millions on the extraordinary credits of 1887. A second instalment of thirty millions was asked on the credits of 1888, but needlessly, for Admiral Aube had resigned previous to the vote of the credits.

In the Spring of 1887, the Committee which prepared the credits for that year had tried, with the support more or less concealed of some members of the Cabinet, to influence the Secretary of the Navy so as to obtain from him a reduction in the amount of the second instalment. But nothing could shake the strong belief of the courageous Secretary, that he was defending one of the foremost interests of France. Therefore, he answered by a peremptory refusal, which he explained in a letter, the most striking passages of which are these :

"TO MONSIEUR ROUVIER,

"Chairman of the Committee of Ways and Means :

"Mr. Chairman, I regret to have to affirm that no reduction—such as you seem to contemplate—can be accepted in regard to the credits demanded,

without jeopardizing the effective fighting value of our navy. The debentures for the navy are of two entirely different kinds; the staff and the material.

"The staffs of the fighting forces are at present reduced to their minimum. They are composed in the main of "specialities": skilled mechanics, engineers, stokers, cannoneers, torpedo men, helmsmen, etc., who are rendered as useful by their mechanical abilities, acquired only through long and slow training at sea, by continued studies, and by the preparation obtained in our special training schools, as by their number.

"As they stand now, we may rest satisfied as to the technical capacity of the staffs, but it is also a fact that in regard to the number of men they are in most of the special services below the requirements of a great war.

"Concerning the material, I do not need to repeat again that it does not meet the contingencies of a naval contest with one or several European nations—should they even be second-rate maritime powers.

"The proofs of this inferiority I have stated several times, whether before the Council of State or the Committee of Ways and Means. I have been successful enough to obtain a first instalment of extraordinary credits, which, despite their evident insufficiency, will at least enable our navy to face, within a few years, all the chances of a naval contest in the European seas, or better in the "national seas," the Channel, the Atlantic, and especially the Mediterranean; but only in these waters.

"To allow a reduction in the credits so necessary to the defence of the country, would be to sign the abdication of France—that is, to agree to leave her unarmed—and this at what moment? At the time when a war seems near at hand, at a time when all the maritime powers, England, Germany, Italy, and Spain, are taxing themselves with the hardest sacrifices in order to bring their navies to a footing consistent with the naval contests of the future.

"No one should believe that I could consent to be the tool of such abdication or such impotency. You should be aware of this. However, it is perhaps best for me to again assure you of my immovable resolution, so as to leave you and your colleagues the liberty of judgment admitting a different view of the future, and of the measures that it requires.

"THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY,  
AUBE.

"(Signed)

"MAY 2, 1887."

A few days later Admiral Aube retired from the administration, and his successor, M. Barbey, did not hesitate an instant to give up the extraordinary credits for the renewal of the fleet and the defence of the coasts. Nevertheless, it remained as an established fact that the Secretary who had just retired, had given, within the short period of seventeen months, an unusual impulse to his department. I will recall only:

(1.) Experiments with the torpedoes, action and shooting, correctness of aim in shooting at a moving object.

(2.) Experiments in the art of navigating the torpedo boats, and on their autonomy.

(3.) Experiments on the respective value of various implements of war and on the new tactics (extensive naval drillings resumed in 1887). The establishment of extensive drillings at sea has since been adopted by all the maritime powers.

(4.) Experiments on the resistance of partitioned structures against the shooting of torpedoes.

(5.) Establishment at Toulon of a workshop for the manufacturing of torpedoes. Until that time we were dependent on foreigners, and we are yet so to a certain extent, the Navy Department having taken great care not to give to the works of Toulon the necessary extension.

(6.) Experiments on the effects of "melinite" projectiles.

(7.) Experiments on the application of electricity to submarine navigation.

(8.) Building of a small boat with great speed and low-water draught, with a floating carriage, for a gun of powerful calibre.

(9.) Survey of the strategic positions most suitable as a base of operations for a cruise war.

We should remark that the plans for new ships prepared by Admiral Aube comprised only vessels with a maximum speed; cruisers, gunboats with a low-water draught, torpedo boats; but not a single ironclad.

The Secretary estimated that a first-class cruiser should be put in service, at the latest, three years after the laying of the first timber of the keel. What is our position in the matter? The order for putting in slip "*Le Jauréguiberry*," a battleship of 11,824 tons, dates from April 8, 1891, and it is not yet in service at the time I am writing. The last tests have just been interrupted by the explosion of a boiler, which killed outright six marines.

The order for laying in slip the coast vessel "*Le Bouvines*," 6,610 tons, dates back from December 18, 1889, and this ship has just been put into service.

For "*Le Dupuy de Lôme*," a cruiser of 6,300 tons, the order for starting to build was given on November 26, 1887. The mishaps at the trials of this vessel have been so numerous that she was not put in service until 1895.

On the other hand, "*The Majestic*," a British ironclad, of 14,910 tons, was entered in service not more than two years after the laying of the first piece of keel.



The Germans endeavor to follow the example of the English, with the hope of overtaking, and even excelling them. The "Kaiser Frederic III.," a German ironclad of 11,500 tons launched in July, 1896, at Wilhelmshafen, and of which William II. said at the time of launching that she was equal to the most powerful ships of the other European navies, and superior to many of them, was built within sixteen months, having been keeled March 5, 1895.

This constitutes a remarkable progress in the rapidity of building, in comparison to the last ships of the same class, as the "Wörth," "The Brandenburg," and the "Kurfürst-Wilhelm," which required respectively thirty-two, twenty-four and twenty-one months. But the Germans are not yet satisfied, while they claim with reason that in this respect they come next to the English, and much ahead of the French.

Finally, Admiral Aube succeeded in realizing a permanent and full equipment of our navy. He had stated this principle, that the modern ship, an implement of delicate workmanship and of infinite intricacy, is really available only when she stands in the full sea-equipment, and that we may not reckon, at the time of a declaration of war upon the vessels in reserve.

With Mons. Barbey, who succeeded Admiral Aube, the maddest sort of reaction towards the old-fashioned, hackneyed navy took place in every service of the department. Mons. Barbey had for his principal merit to be the docile instrument of the conceptions of the old Admiralty—if we may so describe the vague reasonings of the chiefs, most of them raised through favoritism, and each of them systematically hostile to all progressive endeavors.

They hastened to return to the organization of a navy, powerless against England, to the great relief of all the blockheads whose quietude had been disturbed by Admiral Aube, and especially to the complete satisfaction of the influential manufacturers of steel plates.

Mons. Barbey took the opposite side of all the ideas of his predecessor, undid all that he had achieved, and re-established all that he had demolished.

To mark more forcibly his profound disdain for the outgoing reformer, the new Secretary had the cynicism to refuse to Admiral Aube a commission at sea, when the turn of the latter

came. In fact, he was not even willing to grant his predecessor a "*prefecture maritime*." Admiral Aube was successively denied all the positions to which he had a right; he had to atone by this kind of ostracism for his patriotic efforts to make the French navy a powerful implement of victory in the whole machinery of the national defence.

As the question was no longer to obtain from the navy the most powerful effort, there was no further need for the extraordinary credits of the fallen Secretary; they were useless to merely maintain the old wanderings of an eye-catching fleet.

Thus Mons. Barbey gave up at once the demand for the remaining 140 millions, on the 200 granted in principle.

He went even further; he reduced to fourteen millions the second yearly instalment of thirty millions, which Admiral Aube had proposed to include in the credits for 1888. Further, he postponed the building of the cruisers laid in building slips by Admiral Aube, to such an extent as to nullify ten millions of the thirty millions constituting the first extraordinary annuity, already voted for.

Thus, of the two hundred millions which the Committee of Ways and Means and the House of Representatives of 1886 had estimated as the total amount of the extraordinary credits indispensable to the reconstitution of our naval power, one hundred and seventy-five millions remained unclaimed.

It is true that three years later, after a campaign through the press, marked notably by the publication of a pamphlet "*Le péril maritime*," written under the inspiration of Admiral Aube by his secretary, Mons. Paul Fontin, they were obliged to accept, after several interpellations, the increase of credits imposed by the Parliament on the Secretary of the Navy. But these credits, which he had to spend against his will for new ships, were applied no longer to a "*fleet for speed*," but to heavy iron clads, which render us powerless towards England.

As a logical consequence of this programme, the studies in regard to submarine navigation were discontinued, because the appearance on the scene of the small submarine torpedo will give the last blow to the iron-plated mastodons. They suppressed purely and simply the small vessel with high speed constructed by Admiral Aube, by stripping the "*Gabriel Charmes*," from which they even took away her name.

It goes without saying that none of the new credits was applied to establishing bases of operations (Porto Vecchio and Bizerte), which according to Admiral Aube were of first necessity for our action in the Mediterranean. The work begun at Porto Vecchio was suddenly stopped ; the flotilla devoted to the movable defence of Corsica, which would have become the means of a counter-attack in case the enemy had shown itself on our coasts, was entirely mustered out. The Admiral du Prémèsnil who commanded in Corsica, was recalled, and they proceeded to complete the dismemberment of our forces as they had been organized by Admiral Aube : coast vessels in the Channel, cruisers at Brest, squadron ironclads in the Mediterranean. All the vessels were again grouped regardless of any rational idea, and as Admiral Aube had succeeded by means of reduced staffs in permanently and fully equipping the battleships, they proceeded to dismantle most of them, and came back to the system of reserve vessels.

True, they have since been obliged to restore the movable defence of Corsica, but, unfortunately, in a manner very different from the organization of Admiral Aube. They had also to return to the reduced staffs of the latter, under the name of "Squadron of Reserve," but this measure was not applied to the ships of the movable defence, and this explains the grave shortcomings of the torpedoes.

In 1894 I published in *La Justice*, simultaneously with Mons. Paul Fontin, in the "*French Navy*," official documents which proved that the vessels of the movable defence of Toulon were by a large majority unserviceable. The sensation was such that the Secretary and Admiralty were obliged to yield, at least seemingly, to the exigencies of public opinion. An extra parliamentary commission of inquiry was cunningly selected by the Secretary of the Navy for the purpose of explaining to the very same Secretary how his own incapacity and that of his advisers had brought such results.

At this very moment the kind inquirers are still laboring upon this puzzle. They have already dodged—by devices of various kinds—most of the questions upon which they were to stimulate discussion. It matters little to know how long a time they will continue to scribble uselessly the official papers. The same questions which, almost fifty years ago, confronted the

Dufaure Commission are still pending to-day, as the Admiralty has refused to bring them to any solution before the Inquirers of 1896. Only the Dufaure Committee had produced positive results, and it required the "*coup d'état*" of December to prevent its being brought to a successful end. For the miscarriage of 1896 no force is necessary. It is sufficient to leave the Commissioners of the Admiralty—for these so-called Inquirers are nothing else—to proceed and drown themselves in a flood of satisfactory resolutions. Those who wish to satisfy themselves in regard to the character of the present inquiry, and of the retrograde movement of the present generation, will have merely to compare the minutes of 1849 with those of 1896. It is the most crushing evidence against the so-called reformers of our epoch.

By one of the chances of the preliminary see-saw, Mons. Lockroy became Secretary of the Navy during the course of the inquiry. We might have expected from him important reforms. Instructed in the desiderata of the navy by officers belonging to the school of Admiral Aube, Mons. Lockroy knew as well as any one the evils of our organization and the wretched results which it has brought forward.

Although capable of rational judgment, and having a clear understanding of the work he was undertaking, experience proved that he was greatly deficient in regard to methods, character, and will power. Mons. Lockroy, fallen from power, is now busy writing an explanatory book on his Secretaryship. This volume will no doubt be of great interest, but should not a member of the government have acted, instead of writing? If Mons. Lockroy had acted, he would not be to-day under the necessity of working up explanations—his acts would speak for him. There is no reason to doubt his good will, but not daring to oppose the so-called head men of our navy, he managed to coax, to tack, to be of the same opinion as every one else, and to recoil before any manly decisions. Not speaking of the personal favors that he may have indiscriminately granted, the greater part of his labors amount to again bringing under consideration three of the Articles of Admiral Aube's programme: 1st, Submarine navigation; 2d, Flotilla of gunboats, 3d, Projectiles with explosives. But by a contradiction unexplainable in any other person but him, he has completely forgotten

the important factor of speed, and he had not the courage to do away with the steel-armoured monsters, against which he had hurled so many eloquent phrases.

He has laid in building slips an ironclad to cost 27 millions of francs, and has prepared plans for another in his estimates of the credits for 1897, which reaches the figure of 30 millions. To Mons. Lockroy belongs the honor of having reached for the first time this amount for the cost of a single battleship. No necessity to say that he entirely neglected the question of the bases of operations!

Even the studies which he ordered have been conducted without either energy or system. As an illustration, for the flotilla of gunboats, the Secretary had to contend against his own subordinates, who were so obstinate as to take no account of his wish. He was not able to exact obedience, and the transformation of the despatch boat, "*La Dragonne*," which could have been done two or three months after his appointment, was not yet accomplished when the administration was overturned. Thanks to this process, it is Admiral Besnard, a determined adversary of the "*petite marine*," who will be in charge of the experiment. One may guess what will be the result.

Concerning the equipment, the mistakes were still heavier. Since 1891 I had denounced on the floor of the House the inertia of the marine artillery, which has allowed for two years the Italian and English vessels to be covered with rapid-fire guns, without putting our fleet in shape to return shot for shot. Space does not permit me to treat now extensively upon this interesting subject, which I intend to resume in the future.

A delegation of the Commission of Inquiry has taken upon itself—without daring to consult the Commission, and without having the courage to name a reporting Secretary—to decide that everything was for the best in the artillery department. I should not be surprised if the question was not so absolutely buried as the Commissioners believe.

Such is the actual state of the claims of the "Young Navy" against the hackneyed and impotent Admiralty. The question is whether France is to be satisfied with a navy inferior in number and speed—to mention only those two factors in a fight—which admits of pompous promenading and platonic exhibitions, but leaves her unable to face her redoubtable rivals with

any chance of success, such as the enormous sacrifices to which the nation has cheerfully consented should assure her.

Certainly not ! France, mutilated, expects of her army and of her navy to efficiently keep watch of her frontiers on land and sea, so as to insure a perfect integrity of the territory. Against so many foes, the enterprise is vast. Thus no chance must be neglected. Thus the government of the Republic owes to the bravery of the combatants on sea and land to supply them with the best implements of warfare. To achieve this end, it is necessary to follow day by day the progress of science, and when the changes commanded by the progress of science are opposed, it is indispensable that mere routine be crushed in order that the country be saved !

Against abuses and ignorance, against presumptuous incapacity, against favoritism, routine, and the thousand forms of folly of the administration, which twenty years ago came so near crushing us forever, the new generation has the duty of struggling to the end. At least let the teachings of past defeats be of some benefit. Let the new generation turn away from the fallaciousness of official optimism, let it exact full light, make out plain truth; and, to uphold France, let it reckon no more on former so-called saviours, sadly embodied nowadays in impotent officials, but on the eager watch, on the stubborn labor of every hour, on the will forever present to give at any time its full effect to the courage of a nation of which the curtailed territory proves that the greatest bravery is powerless to command victory if it is not assisted by systematic preparations during time of peace.

G. CLEMENCEAU.